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Survivor Guilt

By ERNEST A. RAPPAPORT

AMONG SURVIVORS OF the holocaust those who know the most are usually the least communicative—the former concentration camp inmates. The concentration camp is a derivative of the prisoner of war camp, but as a terror instrument of Hitlerism it was a training center for professional sadists and a forced hard labor camp for the isolation and extermination of the people who could have formed an opposition against the regime and specifically of the Jews. The existence of the concentration camps was surrounded by a taboo not only inside the Hitler-dominated countries but also outside of them, though for different reasons. There was the anxiety that in the twentieth century, in the midst of the greatest scientific and technological progress, the mask of civilization could be pulled off the face of mankind. But this anxiety could be avoided by playing ostrich, therefore world opinion was only too willing to accept German camouflage of the concentration camp system and the Gestapo's hypocritical outcry over the atrocity propaganda. Survivors of the camp were treated as unwelcome disturbers of a lulled world conscience and their persistent mental anguish after liberation was shrugged off as their resistance against adjustment.

Only after a long latency period was there an upsurge of interest by psychiatrists in the late psychic consequences of the traumatization of the victims of the holocaust. It was awakened by the need for psychiatric examinations required by the German *Wiedergutmachung* (restitution) courts,

but especially by the Eichmann trial. Concomitant with this interest was the emergence of a specific psychiatric nomenclature consisting in the main of the four terms: 1) *Anlagebedingtheit*, 2) Regression, 3) Identification with the aggressor, 4) Survivor guilt. Each of these terms somehow betrays the embarrassment and discomfort of the examiner or investigator over the victims' resistance against the preferred attitude of forgetting.

Anlagebedingtheit pronounces the persecutors almost completely guilt-free and makes the victim's *Anlage*, i.e. constitution, responsible for the persistence of reactions to the traumatization. Tantamount to it is the attitude of throwing back the guilt into the lap of the victims' parents or of making the victims' upbringing, the infantile neurosis, responsible for an "excessive" vulnerability.

The term "regression" is used to characterize the behavior of the concentration camp inmate as a reversion from a higher to a lower stage of development. *Niederland*¹ speaks of "regression to sadomasochistic and oral narcissistic levels, emotional detachment rapidly progressing to depersonalization and derealization," etc. All these labels have only a limited usefulness; they may be traditional but are really inadequate. The concentration camp captive could not afford to regress, he needed the utmost alertness to detect and utilize the smallest chance which promised survival. The conditions under which he vegetated were inconceivably inhuman but not regressive, because regressive means turned back

into infancy or childhood, and no infant or child lives under such conditions. The analysts' insistence on "the association of concentration camp sufferings to childhood experiences"² is unrealistic; the confinement in camp was aimed toward the systematic preparation of readiness for death after the total destruction of initiative, identity and the will for survival. If captives suffered from diarrhea it was not on account of anal regression but because of experimental diets, such as decomposed whale meat cooked in the soup. The apathy, the equanimity and emotional bluntness of the camp inmate may be called regression, but it was adaptation to the environment, regression in the service of the ego.

Regression to oral narcissistic levels refers to "the blissful feeling of the prisoner when he had his stomach filled with a liberal portion of soup and a *"Nachschlag,"** or his exclusive preoccupation with food which Frankl called his gastric Onanism³ when he was chronically hungry. E. A. Cohen,⁴ in agreement with Miss H. O. Bluhm, defined depersonalization as a defense mechanism of the ego, a protective blocking of emotions for the purpose of observation of the self and the environment in preparation for self-expression, i.e. writing a book after discharge from camp. A. J. Herzberg described a feeling of unreality in Bergen Belsen as if he was watching a stage performance or a motion picture.

"Regression at times is a better form of adaptation than active participation" according to Dr. de Wind.⁵

What has been described as regressive manifestations in the behavior disturbances of concentration camp survivors represents fixations to the camp trauma. These are usually repetitive dreams or nightmares which prove

that the patients' ego has been so severely attacked and humiliated that it seems to hold on to the defense position for life. There is no purpose in telling the patient: "It's enough, forget it, stop it." It is just by repetition that he tries to master the trauma but it was not of a kind that it can be mastered; and as a former inmate and a witness of the workings of the most perverse slave camp in the history of mankind he may not even want to forget. His remembering provides him with a persistent validation of the reality of the camp experience and not of the "negative myth" of the concentration camp, as Hoppe⁶ calls it.

 OF COURSE, under the stress of forced labor, continually hungry, with the skull shaved and as a mere number immersed in a doomed crowd, and without privacy even on the latrine, to still hold on to hope was a kind of spite against the despised oppressor. Often when hope was dwindling the captive wondered if resignation was not better than a hopeless hope, but the resignation was never complete. Resignation could mean that the captive accepted that the camp was his place, the place he belonged to and the only place in Greater Germany where one need not be ashamed to be. Resignation also meant that as one had already been mourning over one's guiltless condemnation to a living death, one gradually began to accept death as just another kind of liberation and resolved to die at least with some dignity and without giving the enemy the satisfaction of a useless struggle, accompanied with more of his dehumanizing scorn. E. de Wind quotes Sartre who wrote that "death is our best friend, the only one on whom we always can rely."

In regard to "identification with the aggressor" we have to differentiate between the pre-channelized identifica-

* A ladle full of soup after the first distribution.

tion and the enforced emergency identification, the identification by the power of the circumstances and for the purpose of self-preservation. Elie A. Cohen⁴ has pointed out that "only a small minority" of the inmates introduced both the methods and the standards of the S.S., it was "that part of the camp aristocracy that was formed by the German criminals," the green Kapos who were quite different from the red Kapos. "In these camps in which the "reds," the political prisoners, held the leading functions, there was as a rule more justice and less corruption than in those where the green captives were in control." To elaborate on this point one can say that the inmates who identified with the aggressor in the fullest sense and consequently were appointed to Kapos and foremen by the SS, were their close associates who belonged to the same family and shared the same background of psychopathy and anti-Judaism, but who had acted too independently on the outside, Feme murderers, SA men and other unruly Nazis. They were frequently given the insignia of the "reds" to function as spies but especially to prevent any unified action of the captives against their captors. As members of the same family group there was a libidinal tie in existence between this category of inmates and the SS. Identification with the aggressor could be established easily by this group and the aggressor be accepted as a parental image and an object of admiration. Even taking full account of the heterogeneity of the camp community and that the political captives who were united by their rejection of national socialism on principle constituted only a part of the occupancy, the feelings common to almost all inmates were the contempt in which they held the SS and the hope of leaving the concentration camp alive. "These reflec-

tions were nonexistent in an often very influential group: the leading criminals," states Cohen. "This group had so completely identified themselves with the SS that they did not despise them nor had they any objection to spending the rest of their lives in a concentration camp."

The inmates who utilized every opportunity to sabotage forced labor certainly did not identify with the aggressor. The word "achtzehn," 18, for "Achtung," attention, was commonly used to warn a group of captives who had just been relaxing that an SS guard was approaching. Ridiculing the SS officers, for instance by giving them derogatory nicknames, could also not be called identification with the aggressor. Aside from the inmates' use of humor as a defense, the behavior of the SS, though disastrous to their captives, was ridiculous enough because of its unreality and irrationality. The criteria of conduct in a concentration camp were irrational but no captive could escape the necessity to make at least a pretense of identification with the standard behavior. To speak of "sado-masochistic regression,"⁷ i.e. of the need of the masochist to provoke the sadist, "the interdynamics of Nazis and concentration camp Jews,"⁸ of the complicity of the victim with the aggressor is a sad commentary reflecting anti-Jewish tendencies even among psychoanalysts. A similar statement upholding this implied anti-Jewish view has been made by E. Simenauer.⁹ It is under the pretext of scientific objectivity that analysts arrive at such conclusions. However, they are responsible for such frivolous absurdities as in Robert Shaw's play "The Man in the Glass Booth."

A TERM WHICH WAS coined explicitly for the understanding of the depression of the survivor is survivor guilt. It is paradoxical and fits better

to the liberator than to the victim. The guilt can only be a guilt of omission, i.e. the victim blames himself that he might still have been able to prevent the death of a close relative or family member if he had only acted differently at the right moment. It is a denial of his powerlessness and a belated attempt to win control over a situation which was uncontrollable. According to Niederland,¹⁰ survivor guilt is "a form of unresolved grief and mourning. Behind the self-reproaches were found repressed rage and resentment against the lost parents for failing to protect the patients from the persecution." This would be the reversal of the assumed guilt which makes the survivor feel as if by surviving, by having been spared, he had abandoned the people to whom he belonged and whom out of loyalty he should have followed into the gas chamber. In a survey collected by E. de Wind, Clarice Kestenbaum reported the case of a 35-year-old Polish-Jewish woman who suffered from insomnia, nightmares and multiple phobias, had a very low self-esteem and kept herself withdrawn from people inclusive of her husband and her two children. She also complained of psychosomatic symptoms.

Her most horrible experience in camp was when her mother was shot in front of her eyes. While her mother was dying she made a vow to her that she would care for the siblings, but she knew at the moment "that I never would be happy again in my life." After her liberation she found her younger brother and two of her sisters again. She was the strong one of her family in the United States until all of them had found jobs. She broke down when she began to attain "normal happy goals," such as a husband, children, and a home of her own.

It is obvious that this woman could maintain her self-esteem and her tenuous psychic balance as long as she

could replace her mother and undo the loss of her mother by identifying with her. But when her task was finished she felt fixation to the adolescent age at the time of her mother loss and her resolution never to be happy again, never to forget her mother's violent death. Naturally, in her memory the martyred mother was saintly and beautiful, therefore the analyst by interpreting jealous, Oedipal hostility of the patient directed against her mother only created a situation of negative transference. The analyst's admission that she could hardly listen to her patient's horrifying experiences reveals her own survivor guilt.

The frequency of psychosomatic illness in concentration camp survivors is connected with the inability to verbalize the traumatic experiences and to express them instead in non-articulate body language. Compared with the world conspiracy of silence at the time when the atrocities of the Hitler regime against the Jews were committed, the psychoanalytic treatment situation represents a kind of miniature conspiracy of silence in which the survived but traumatized victim is ashamed to describe the phases of humiliation and dehumanization he had undergone and the therapist is ashamed to confess his survivor guilt for not having demonstrated his protest when the massive persecution and the massacre of the Jews took place. Analysts who understandably have no conception of the unheard of forms of aggression to which concentration camp inmates were subjected have a resistance to accept that the reactive fantasies of aggression and rage could have developed in statu nascendi in the camp environment without being just a reactivation of infantile fantasies of aggression directed against one or both parents. The comparison of SS men, skillfully schooled in the remorseless

acting out of sadistic and necrophilic impulses, with parental figures is irrational. Psychoanalysts are tuned in to the narrow field of child-parent conflict, especially in the Oedipal period, but the trauma was so exceptional and so massive that neurotic derivatives of childhood conflict were rather overwhelmed and extinguished by the trauma than re-activated.

MY EXPERIENCE AS a psychiatric consultant called upon for an expert opinion on which the survivor could base his claim for restitution payments by the German government led me to the discovery of a regular diagnostic syndrome which I shall call the *undoing compulsion*. A brief vignette will serve as an example of this compulsion and the severe pathology that can result from it.

The patient, a 39-year-old Jewish woman who came to each interview accompanied by her husband, who worked for his father who owned a taxicab company, suffered from an agoraphobia. Her father had owned a transportation company with buses and taxis but had lost his license when she was 15 years old and when the Nazis occupied her hometown. From then on she had to wear the yellow Jew badge when she was on the street and at home she had to sit at the sewing machine to help support her impoverished family. She went through the successive stages of resettlement in a ghetto, of a six day transport in a cattle wagon tightly packed with people without food and water, and the arrival at the infamous ramp of the railway terminal in Auschwitz she was selected for another transport, this time to Gelsenkirchen, where she was assigned to forced labor in a munition factory and in another munition factory, both having been bombed by British bombing planes. Then came the death march east and finally the liberation by the American Army and assignment to a D.P. camp.

From the over two thousand women who had left Auschwitz-Birkenau with her fewer than one hundred were left. A search in her home country, Czechoslovakia, for some remaining member of her family convinced her that she was the only one who was spared from extinction. She married the man whom she had met in the D.P. camp and who represented a father image to her and who provided a home for her; but from then on she avoided walking on the street, though she no longer was forced to wear a Jew badge, and dedicated herself to undoing the vacuum that the massacre of her family and friends had dug into her life. She tried to accomplish this task by an addiction to two miscarriages, followed by an addiction to surgery through which after a tubal ligation she delivered a gallbladder, an appendix, and an enlarged thyroid. When her career of compulsive restitution was finally stopped she fell into a depression.

Some people have compared the traumatization of a former concentration camp inmate with that of a soldier who has returned from a prisoner of war camp. Comparisons have been also made with the victims of Hiroshima. Recently I even heard somebody mention that the stresses to which an astronaut is exposed must resemble those of a concentration camp captive. In order to evaluate the differences we have to consider three phases of the traumatization: the camp experience itself, the liberation, and the post-traumatic trauma. While the captives were ready and prepared for the liberators, elected a reception committee and decorated the camp with improvised flags of the Allies, the liberators were unprepared and not ready for their task of fraternization. They were visibly shocked and in their state of anxiety were concerned only with two problems, namely, how to prevent the lib-

erated captives from gorging themselves with food and drink and how to maintain strict law and order by preventing the newly liberated from lynching their former torturers and executioners, who after exchanging their uniforms with the striped garments of their former victims had tried in their disguise to disappear in the crowd. When the liberated were disappointed and expressed their resentment it was interpreted as lack of gratitude. Once again the camp veterans felt unwanted and in a displaced persons' camp, as belonging to no one. "On June 11, 1945 Joseph Dunner¹¹ submitted to the headquarters of the Psychological Warfare Division an account of seventeen D.P. centers with an aggregate of 14,000 Jewish inmates. In some of the camps the Jews lived in barbed-wire enclosures still equipped with deadly electrical apparatus that was designed to keep the ambitious from escaping to life outside. In none of the camps were the D.P.'s allowed or able to secure the tools which they needed to build bathrooms, kitchens and laundry facilities. In most of the camps, in spite of the official extra ration, the food was insufficient for people who had been undernourished for years and who were suffering from various diseases." When they finally emigrated, they felt uprooted in a foreign country, with the exception of Israel, whose language they did not understand and with little opportunity to return to their previously learned occupations or professions. Liberated prisoners of war return to their fatherland honored as heroes, a home and a family waiting for them, nursing care, protection and understanding is provided for them, and they can return to the jobs held before or receive government funds for learning new skills or a new profession. The astronaut certainly experiences severe and exceedingly unusual anxiety and

stress, but the honors and the rewards which are waiting for him on his return are the highest that any human being can expect, and his future in his own country is guaranteed.

IN A DISCUSSION at the Chicago Psychoanalytic Society Bruno Bettelheim let the survivor ask the question: "Why was I spared?" I volunteered to answer him in the name of the patient: "I was spared for not allowing myself to forget and maybe for not letting people whom I can reach to forget." The first public statement that Sepp Dietrich, who snatched Mussolini out of the hands of the Italian partisans and delivered him on order to Hitler's bunker, made after his release from Spandau prison was: "Let's put an end to the Jewish atrocity propaganda." The meaning is clear, it is not the murderer but the victim who is guilty.

Of course, not forgetting is in conflict with the treatment goal of forgetting and thus makes the suffering patient a priori untreatable. Therefore, forgetting should not be made into a treatment goal, however making the survivor realize that what has been done cannot be undone is a resignation which the still mourning survivor may finally accept *nolens volens*. Resignation to the unchangeable has always been a goal of psychological treatment.

Survivor guilt is a term with the unequivocal implication that freedom from guilt could have been obtained by non-survival. It is a guilt which the Jews have carried for nearly two thousand years and of which Eichmann could have freed them if he would have had just a little more time and if the Jews would have offered him more cooperation. The impression is created that these survivors blame themselves for having failed in their duty as allies of the Nazis, an absurdity which was picked up by the New Left. We can

see the close connection between Auschwitz and the sovereign State of Israel and that the supposed guilt of the survivors of Auschwitz for their survival is the primary source of the guilt they supposedly have incurred by their usurpation of the right for a national home.

Morton Irving Seiden¹² has written about the Jew unconsciously accepting his suffering as a deserved punishment for his guilt of having survived. He comes to this conclusion in the course of his writing about the compulsive repetition in Christian-Jewish relations and mutual identifications in regard to infanticide, parricide, and deicide which comprise the essence of anti-Semitism. But by his own admission being neither an anthropologist nor a psychologist nor a theologian he is not sure of his full competence in clarifying

these complex issues. His book has merit as every book that offers illustrations of anti-Judaism, but we have to be extremely reluctant to accept any type of "mutual identification," any type of identification with the aggressor. Such rash statements tend to obscure the issue of guilt, to fade out the difference between murderers and victims, to whitewash the accused, and under the guise of personally uninvolved objectivity and detachment to falsify the records of history. They encourage Neo-Nazis in their demands to put an end to "the Jewish indemnity swindle" and to the whole "Jewish atrocity propaganda."

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Footnotes

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4. Elie A. Cohen, *Human Behavior in the Concentration Camp*, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 1953.
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The Case of the Stravinsky Cantata

By JACOB DRACHLER

I have no confidence in the justice of posterity and have never understood the logic of the argument that though what *is* may be wrong, the consecration of it through time will make it right. To me all histories are deterministic. They offer not "what was," but a choice governed by the determination, conscious and unconscious, of the choosers.

Igor Stravinsky, *Themes and Episodes*
(p. 113)

IT HAPPENS THAT Stravinsky himself chose, in his *Cantata* of 1952, to set to music an old text which repeated the historic Christian guilt-libel on the Jews. A recent performance of the *Cantata* at a local church prompted my own choices: to register a protest with the church and to inquire into Stravinsky's rather surprising acceptance of that text. The course of the protest and the inquiry are recorded here, climaxed by the significant, if not quite expected, promise of a revised text.

The seminal historiographic choices had been made by the Gospel writers who shaped their accounts to place the onus for the death of Jesus on the Jewish people, as a whole and in perpetuity. The unparalleled consequences of the "consecration" of this guilt-libel through nineteen centuries of Christian history are well known. The choices of the past still govern, but there are also signs of new determinations.

Over the past century or so, there has been some critical scrutiny by

Christian scholars of the anti-Semitic "mole of nature" in Christianity. These re-examinations, given wider cognizance by Vatican II, have found contemporary expression in the writings of such Christian revisionists as Friedrich Heer, Alice and Roy Eckardt, and Alan T. Davies. The current state of this scrutiny is also reflected in a notable symposium on "The Trial of Jesus in the Light of History" by eight scholars (five Christians and three Jews) in the quarterly, *Judaism*, Winter 1971. As its editor, Robert Gordis, indicates in his foreword the only historical certainty about the trial is that "practically nothing is certain about the event." While the symposiasts differ widely as to what historical facts can be deduced from the Gospels, they all agree on one thing which may fairly be summarized in this sentence from one of them (Robert M. Grant, Professor in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago):

In the light of history, any attempt to assign the crucifixion of Jesus to "the Jews" is absolutely absurd.

But, such findings, as I discovered not too long ago, had not yet influenced the practice of such a presumably enlightened institution as the [Dominated*] Church, or for that matter, of so brilliant and humane a mind as Igor Stravinsky's—at least not in the

* As I shall call it for purposes of this article.